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SUBJECT: Rumors and Realities of Rwandan Returnees in North Kivu

REF: Kinshasa 573

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Statistics from UNHCR, MONUC, the Congolese National Commission for Refugees (CNR), and independent field investigations indicate that significant numbers of ethnic Tutsis are entering North Kivu from Rwanda. UNHCR's estimate of 12,000, while plausible, is probably inflated. Those crossing the border say they are Congolese refugees returning to lands they fled during the violence of the 1990s, but very few possess official refugee identification. Reports from IDP camps and other sources on the ground suggest returnees are young adults under 30 years old with little recent connection to the Kivus, but family groups have also settled in Congolese IDP camps. The movement appears to be encouraged by ex-CNDP elements on the Congolese side of the frontier, who have long called for the return of Congolese Tutsi refugees in Rwanda and Burundi. Congolese authorities in the General Directorate of Migration (DGM) and the National Intelligence Agency (ANR) appear willing to look the other way. A major political battle -- and perhaps more violence -- looms as the local populations and their political leaders fear a Tutsi land grab. On the other hand, Congolese Tutsis and their political leaders assert they are moving back onto land which is legally their own. In the end, it may be difficult to accurately differentiate between returning Congolese refugees, returning IDPs, and economic migrants.
End summary.

Rumors and Reports Making the Rounds

¶2. (SBU) Since July-August, persistent and frequent stories have circulated in North Kivu that significant numbers of people have crossed from Rwanda clandestinely at night in an organized fashion. They are often described as Congolese Tutsis who fled or migrated to Rwanda in the 1990s, but some insist they are "Rwandans." (Note: Many Congolese do not make a distinction between Rwandans or Banyarwanda, especially Tutsis, who have lived in Congo for years.
End note.)

¶3. (SBU) UNHCR hesitates to call these migrants refugees for several reasons: they are not returning via UNHCR facilitation; they lack refugee identification; and the number of Congolese refugees in Rwandan camps has remained steady at about 53,000. In October, UNHCR worked closely with the Congolese National Commission for Refugees (CNR) to assess the situation. They found that 11,902 people clandestinely crossed from Rwanda between January 1 and October 21. MONUC military sources concur with that figure. CNR derived this number by asking local authorities in Masisi (the supposed final destination for the returnees) to report on refugee arrivals. The CNR data is ambiguous as to whether new arrivals are refugees or IDPs, noting that some arrivals are from as early as **¶2002**.

¶4. (SBU) Most of those coming from Rwanda are reported to be crossing the border near Kibumba, 25 kilometers north of Goma. They

reportedly arrive on market days (Mondays and Thursdays) so they can blend in with the crowds, then depart in busses heading primarily toward Mushake, Kitchanga and Kirolirwe in Masisi District. Others apparently walk with their cattle off the roads around the volcanoes.

International Facilitation's Investigation

¶ 15. (SBU) Goma-based diplomats have jointly investigated the rumors and reports to assess the reality. Members of the group, including representatives from the U.S., France, the UK, and the Netherlands, visited Kibumba and the nearby Rwandan border, as well as Kitchanga in Masisi to meet with refugees, local officials and locally based UN and NGO staff. They engaged a local Congolese employee of one of the representatives (a half-Tutsi Kinyarwanda speaker) who volunteered to go to Kibumba early on market day, mingle with people coming across the border, catch a bus to Kitchanga and report his observations.

Population Movement is Real

¶ 16. (SBU) Results of these investigations confirmed that there has been significant cross border movement since mid-year. Ndengo Viature, president of the overwhelmingly Tutsi Kahe IDP camp in Kitchanga, reported that the first arrivals from Rwanda came in July. On November 19, Kahe camp housed 305 families from Rwanda out of a total of 3,650 families, with one or two new families arriving every day.

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¶ 17. (SBU) Crossborder movements have been visible since June, according to the dispatcher at the Association of Congolese Chauffeurs (ACCO) taxi stand in Kibumba next to the main north-south road. The vast majority of those crossing the border want to go to Masisi and to accommodate them, he has dispatched more minibus taxis in that direction.

¶ 18. (SBU) By September, the continued flow through Kibumba caused Congolese authorities in the CNR to take note. In an effort to assess the situation more systematically, CNR has worked with ACCO since September 10, compiling a list of Rwandan arrivals using transport at the ACCO stand. They record names, how many are in each group, where they claim to be coming from, where they say they are going to, and their refugee status. According to this registry, it appears that over 700 individuals coming from Rwanda registered at the taxi stand between September 10 and November 17. The ACCO dispatcher responsible for compiling the CNR list indicated that the border crossings always occur on market days and that 15-50 people cross on these days. He reported that on one day 101 people registered.

¶ 19. (SBU) Crossborder flows at a village between Kibumba and Goma east of the main north-south road were also reported. Residents of a local village (that began as an IDP camp in 2003) said that about 20 refugees per day had walked through their village from the Rwandan border, apparently toward Goma. This assertion could not be confirmed and seems like a high figure.

Numbers Uncertain

¶ 10. (SBU) Although these observations indicate that crossborder movement has increased significantly, they do not give a sense of the overall scale of the movement. But they do provide a starting point. If one extrapolates that the flow through Kibumba occurred at roughly the same rate in the three months before September 10 as it did in the two months after, then roughly 1,750 refugees have crossed there since early June.

¶ 11. (SBU) The reports of movement through the south of Kibumba, and the experience of displaced persons elsewhere, suggest that not all the crossborder movement goes through the formal registration

point/taxi stand at Kibumba. Conservatively estimating that about one-quarter of the crossborder movement is not registered at Kibumba and temporarily discounting the villagers' count of 20 refugees per day, an additional 450 refugees are present. This brings the total to about 2,100 since early-mid June at a minimum.

¶12. (SBU) In Masisi, there is evidence of population movement of a similar size. In the Kahe camp, there are 305 families registered. Taking the normal assumption of five persons per household, that would be approximately 1,525 persons. Serge Derthoms, the UNHCR representative in Kitchanga, reported that at another IDP camp several kilometers south of Kitchanga, 130 families (about 650 individuals) had been registered since June bringing the total of new Rwandan arrivals in the Kitchanga IDP camps to 2,175.

¶13. (SBU) In addition, there are returnees that cannot be counted. UNHCR, NGOs, MONUC, and local authorities all indicated that there are a significant number of people living with families outside the camps in the Kitchanga area. The population of Kitchanga has reportedly swelled considerably in recent months from its normal level of about 70,000. However, much of the influx is due to IDPs (level of about 70,000). However, much of the influx is due to IDPs who have left the formal camps, including around Goma, but have not found home conditions safe enough to return permanently. Derthoms estimated that in the Tutsi quarter of Kitchanga adjacent to the Kahe camp, there are about 300 people living with host families. A representative from MSF-Holland thought the figure was much higher.

¶14. (SBU) In addition, UNHCR reports thousands of new arrivals from Rwanda around the Kirolirwe and Mushake areas, which are both heavily populated by Tutsis. They are reportedly both in camps and settled with host families. Others are reported to be heading toward Walikale. Stories about Tutsis heading toward Masisi off the roads with herds of cattle cannot be confirmed, but should not be completely ruled out.

¶15. (SBU) The consensus within the Goma diplomatic community is that over two thousand people claiming to be refugees have arrived in North Kivu from Rwanda since the middle of this year. This figure almost certainly does not represent the total number of arrivals, and may only be a fraction of the total. Based on what was seen in eyewitness reports, the UNHCR/CNR number of 12,000 returnees is certainly plausible, but is most likely a high

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estimate. A more realistic, although still significant number, would be in the 3,000-6,000 range.

Tutsis Leaving Rwanda

¶16. (SBU) All sources, including the refugees themselves, indicate that the vast majority of new arrivals are ethnic Tutsis. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most of them are young adults traveling in ones and twos and are not attached to larger families. For instance, the local Congolese employee who rode the bus from Kibumba toward Kitchanga reported that of the approximately 40 people from Rwanda who lined up to get on the bus that morning, only two families were in the group. One was a couple with one child, while the other couple had three children. Both families appeared to be Hutu and all others were young Tutsi adults in the 18-30 age group. Viature, president of the Kahe camp, however, asserted that the recent arrivals from Rwanda at his camp comprised a normal mix of young, old and families with children.

¶17. (SBU) Those crossing from Rwanda claim to be Congolese Tutsi refugees who fled to Rwanda in the 1990s. Viature said a "large majority" had been living in the Rwandan camps, mainly at Kibuye and Byumba, though a significant number say they were Congolese who had been living out of the camps amongst the Rwandan population. Virtually none, however, possess refugee documentation. Of over 700 registered at Kibumba by ACCO/CNR only three possessed papers identifying themselves as refugees. This is in spite of the fact that most of the returnees said they were from camps and spelled out what zone and block they came from.

¶18. (SBU) Viature explained the lack of refugee ID/ration cards by saying the refugees had sold them before leaving the camps in Rwanda. The going rate is 15,000 Rwandan Francs (\$27). UNHCR is in the process of cross-checking the Kahe names with the names of those registered in the Rwandan camps. The UNHCR rep in Kitchanga confirmed the cross-checking process, but reported that so far only about 20 of the 305 Kahe family names had shown up on UNHCR's Rwandan camp lists.

¶19. (SBU) People leaving Rwanda tell an almost identical story. Life in Rwanda is "difficult" and they heard that conditions have improved in Congo, so they have returned. Those living in the camps say their rations in Rwanda had been cut, which UNHCR maintains is not true. Some outside the camps complain that they do not have enough land to farm or raise cattle and that better established local Rwandan populations keep them from the best land.

¶20. (SBU) A returnee we interviewed said it was difficult to make a living in Rwanda because goods there are too expensive. She said in 1995 she had fled Nyanzale for Rwanda along with her brother. Now, with a husband and six children, she decided to return because she had heard that conditions in that area had improved. Her brother, who she said had come back to Congo more than a year ago, had also encouraged her. After crossing via Kibumba, she bought a taxi ticket on credit and went to Kirolirwe via Goma. When she learned that conditions in Nyanzale remained too dangerous, she decided to come to the camp in Kitchanga. Her brother lives in Kitchanga town. When asked what he does for a job, she initially said "nothing" and then clarified that "he cultivates with the others."

¶21. (SBU) According to Viature, the refugees have not left the camp Q21. (SBU) According to Viature, the refugees have not left the camp to move back to their old homes in the DRC. Indeed, since September, only eight IDPs out of a total of 3,650 families have left the camp to go home but none of these were returnees from Rwanda.

Degree of Organization

¶22. (SBU) Some of the stories imply an almost military-like precision and organization to the population movements. This may be an exaggeration, but observations suggest at least some, if not a significant amount, of coordination and coaching. Evidence of this includes the following:

-- According to the Congolese employee who rode the Kibumba-Kitchanga bus, Kinyarwanda-speaking ex-CNDP soldiers were on hand at Kibumba to identify and protect the new arrivals.

-- He noted that the passengers from Rwanda appeared to be knowledgeable about prices for tickets and bribes along the way and about how to procure fake Congolese identification papers while being otherwise unfamiliar with North Kivu. As they excitedly approached Goma only one of the other 18 passengers appeared to know

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where the town was.

-- All the refugees told almost precisely the same story: they were Congolese refugees who left for Rwanda in the 1990s; and they left Rwanda because conditions were difficult there and because they had heard rumors that things had improved considerably in Masisi.

¶23. (SBU) Although the most organized part of the operation appears to be the bus transport between Kibumba and Masisi, upon close examination this appears to be a case of entrepreneurial drivers and dispatchers flexibly responding to market demand.

Official Attitudes and Actions

¶24. (SBU) Congolese officials appear to be making no serious efforts to stop the refugee flows. Rather, they appear to be trying to keep track of the movements and, in some cases, to profit from

the movements. At the Kabahunga border post about 3-4 kilometers east of Kibumba, border officials have a very relaxed attitude toward the border crossings. They confirmed that crossborder movement had recently increased beyond the normal market day movements. Few people actually walk across at the formal border crossing, as that is limited to vehicle traffic only. Most cross the open border at whatever point is most convenient and head for Kibumba, which is a hive of activity on market days.

¶25. (SBU) Our Congolese contact noted that DGM officials in Kibumba appeared to facilitate the movement of those crossing the border by asking their nationality and then verbally confirming that they were Congolese before the returnee could respond. The ANR officer inspecting the bus made scant effort to confirm the identification of those crossing the border. When he did, it turned out to be an attempt to solicit a bribe. Later, as the bus reached a check point at Sake, the driver collected money from the passengers so they could pass without being stopped and questioned, i.e., asked about their nationality.

¶26. (SBU) Practically all Congolese Tutsis in North Kivu -- whether affiliated with CNDP, RCD or politically independent -- support the return of the Tutsi refugees from Rwanda and Burundi, although they assert that the current movement is very small and very spontaneous. They complain that practically all other Congolese refugees were able to return to Congo before the 2006 elections except for the Tutsis (Note: The mostly Hutu refugees in Uganda also did not return, although our interlocutors did not mention this fact. End note).

¶27. (SBU) From the North Kivu side of the border, currently there are no signs that the Rwandan Government is doing anything to "push" people to the DRC. There is some surprise however, at the consistent refrain from the returning refugees that they are being given an economic "push" because life has become more difficult in Rwanda. UNHCR notes that Kigali is aware of the population movements, adding that it could do more to control the movements if it wanted.

¶28. (SBU) Comment: Rumors of significant population flows from Rwanda to North Kivu are true, although the precise numbers and status of the individuals remain uncertain. UNHCR, which would normally be expected to engage on issues related to crossborder population movements, has been reluctant act. An internal UNHCR document dated November 10 concluded that "until such time as the identity of these individuals (crossing the border) can be confirmed with UNHCR Rwanda, the bulk of these persons are not considered to be spontaneous refugee returnees, and are therefore not within UNHCR's mandate." The continued movement is increasing calls for action on the part of UNHCR, but a meeting of the Tripartite refugee mechanism between the UNHCR, DRC and Rwanda, already postponed once, was postponed again on November 24. More importantly, this refugee movement is a political bombshell. Local chiefs in Masisi strongly oppose it, and have warned of an "invasion" of 40,000 Tutsi families. Many believe this movement is related to the issue of land-grabbing by ex-CNDP integrated into FARDC, which this year have moved into the Bisie mines and violently pushed civilians, primarily Hutus and Hunde, from areas around Nyabiondo and Lukweti. Fears that Tutsis will move back to their land has fueled the growth of Mai Mai groups to defend locals from the outsiders. Some politicians, including former North Kivu Governor Eugene Serufuli (reftel), have encouraged Congolese IDPs to return to their home areas by warning them that if they do not, Rwandan Tutsis will come to take their land. A major political battle looms over land. If, as appears likely, refugees continue to return and move into areas now held by others, North Kivu, especially Masisi, could turn violent once again. End Comment.

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